

## HAPPINESS IN CHILDHOOD.

EVEN saints are liable to make mistakes—perhaps they become so absorbed in a beautiful future that they forget the past—and therefore very few of us, looking back upon childhood, would echo the words of John Keble, “the heart of childhood is all mirth.” Children are often told that the days of their youth will be the happiest, and that they must gather their roses while they may; but is it true?

Happiness is not our ultimate goal at any period of our existence—it is simply a condition or medium which we believe will accompany the realization of our hearts' desire in any direction. True happiness, it would seem, is only to be found in an adequate conception of the meaning of the past and present as applied to the future, and therefore it implies trust in God and belief in our fellow men.

Mazzini has well said that “with the theory of happiness as the primary aim of existence we shall only produce egotists.” The theory therefore of “a happy childhood,” a time artificially bright and mirthful into which tears and sorrows are never, if possible, to come, is simply turning out a race who put personal enjoyment, if not first, at least in “the firing line,” and who are abashed and aghast when confronted with some of life's sterner realities. Many good and excellent parents truly believe that a happy childhood is the best preparation for life, kept from chilling winds, they think the bud blooms best. “I like to hear Mary's merry laugh,” says such a mother—but does she ever investigate the cause of that laughter? Mirth may be at the opposite pole to happiness, but we “grown-ups” are terribly apt to confuse the two.

I read the other day a pessimistical poem, which spoke thus of Love's Young Dream, “That, and the child's unconscious mirth, are all the light of all their day.” If it were true one would be tempted to pray for any child that one loved that it might die here and now.

But such an expression does point to the root of children's easy merriment, and, at the same time, show why they do

not and cannot then attain to true happiness. The child's mirth is *unconscious*—the delights of chasing one another down hill, of standing on the sand castle surrounded by the sea, of welcoming Daddy home in the evening, are as keen and keener perhaps than any we shall realize later, but the agonies of anticipation, the fear of disappointment, the question as to what is to follow, if they come as keenly to the child's mind, are forgotten at the moment.

Later, when the child learns to say “Oh, I am enjoying myself,” or “How I have looked forward to this,” unconscious mirth is passing from them and there lies before them those years of “*sturm, drang*,” during which we attain through sorrow, tears, buffetings and failures, consciousness of God, the world and ourselves; and may at length attain the height from which we can say, from knowledge and not from ignorance, “He hath done all things well.” Many imagine that the unconscious mirth of early childhood constituted happiness. Look back into your own life and heart—what horrible fear do you remember most? Not that which came over us at some moment fraught with the issues of life and death—many then would be, as Wordsworth truly says, “happy as a bridegroom”—but some nightmare, which woke us shivering in a dark nursery, where a mysterious, ghostly, white something hung limply over a chair. It may have been only nurse's apron, but it was far more terrible than judges and accusers would be now with life or reputation at their mercy.

Ask some man who has battered about the world, which of his past deeds has cost him most remorse; some babyish unconfessed theft it may be, even when many mature crimes trouble him but little.

Many a woman has been made shy for life by the horrible stinging recollection of some foolish childish speech rebuked when consciousness was just beginning to rear its head.

How many of us have nursed, in silence, some pet grief or terror, quite causeless perhaps, through all the days of our childhood, which it would electrify our parents to hear of even now? We forget it, of course, in our games and romps, but how often in quiet moments did it take possession of us? Personally, I lived in hidden terror for years of being taken to prison for having once walked through a private road—and I do not consider this in any way singular.



How hopeless childish griefs are too!—no past happiness discounts them, no future hopes brighten them, unconscious mirth's other facet is unconscious despair. A child convicted of black naughtiness moans, "Oh, what shall I do? what shall I do? I shall never be happy again!" and, oh, wonderful, the child honestly believes it!

But it might be urged separation, disillusionment, unrequited attachment, satiety, are heart-eating sorrows which children rarely know. I verily believe, however, that many a child feels its mother's absence for a week, on a visit, as poignantly as does some grown man or woman feel leaving "the one in the world."

The guilt can get sadly rubbed off our ginger-bread even in the nursery. When we found some little playmate had been "making mischief," we did not then, as we should now, shrug our shoulders and say "poor dear Katie never knows when to hold her tongue." No, indeed! we felt that we did not love Katie any longer, and we heroically resolved to cut her out of our lives. We may have kept it up for a week, but it was an acute misery while it lasted.

At no period of life do we form such hopeless devotions, which bring us a great deal more pain than pleasure, than in childhood. The chosen god or goddess is generally older than oneself—even it may be grown up—and there is very little room in their lives for a childish adorer. Oh, what miseries they make us suffer if they laugh at our transports or fail to notice our little attentions! Unhealthy such things may be and often are, but they are terribly common; and heaven help the child's worshipper whose idol is more clay than gold.

The final blackness of exhausted pleasure is never, to my mind, more plainly depicted than by a child sitting in the middle of a sea of toys with which it has been playing, far too bored and satiated to feel any interest in them; yet inclined to resent most bitterly, suggestions that they might be put away.

I have purposely dwelt upon these dark sides of child-life, though well-knowing they are only a part of the whole, in order to state my case.

If nature by making consciousness of slow growth has withheld from the beginning of life one of the essentials of true happiness, and if experience forbids very many of us to

say that childhood was the happiest part of our lives, and if the pursuit of happiness, for its own sake, at any period will but end in egotism—why should we expect or wish youth to be an especially happy time?

The result of trying to make children "happy" is only too often that we spoil them and ruin their characters by fostering their love of pleasure and their inability to face sorrow.

To give children some knowledge of real trouble and allow them their share in relieving it is the best way to make them sympathetic and to keep them from imaginary or fancied griefs. For instance, a child's capacity for facing life may be increased by a little healthy anxiety for Uncle Henry out in South Africa, and its powers of endurance increased by the example of some poor sufferer in a hospital to whom it is allowed to be a little ministering spirit bringing brightness into some weary lot.

Needless sorrow we must indeed keep from childhood often by sacrificing the mirth of the moment. For instance, if a child screams with delight when teasing someone or something to exasperation, one must interfere and "stop the fun" and point away from mirth to the truer happiness won by denying oneself for the good of others. The highest and best of everything we may indeed give children whenever we can, for if happiness comprises past, present, and future, let them have such a past to build upon as shall give them the vantage ground of a good start—but never buy to-day at the price of to-morrow or, by regarding present so-called "happiness," allow what perhaps will make life doubly difficult in the future. The child's training, far more than its circumstances, makes for its future happiness—taught to look beyond itself, to use its dawning consciousness to behold God, the world, taught to regard its failures not as irrevocable calamities but as instructive experiences, and its sorrows as passing clouds which hide the eternal brightness, childhood, instead of being a round of hysterical pleasures and griefs, will be indeed the dawn of life—a promise of coming day, not a feverish gas-lit ball-room.

A great deal depends upon how we teach children to look forward to old age. Of course if we let them think that the decay of animal vigour is the greatest of all terrible misfortunes, and that to be "old and ugly" is to have lost all that made life worth living, they will snatch at every fleeting mirth



and pleasure and never attain happiness at all for the haunting dread of the future which darkens all beyond. Surely we who are being forced into a fuller recognition of the doctrine of evolution every day and see how types are gradually perfected, see also that the end of life has often a mental power and a clearness of vision which greatly outweigh loss of sight or feebleness of limb. Of course, after a certain point body reacts upon mind and both fail together, but heaven in mercy generally allows consciousness to desert the tottering ruin, and therefore truly do the very aged have a second childhood. The right creed is best expressed in the words of Browning, who in *Rabbi Ben Ezra* has so nobly written of the progress of the individual life towards the eternal happiness of perfection.

Youth shows but half — trust God, see all, nor be afraid,  
Let age approve of youth — and death complete the same!

R. A. P.

### THE SUGGESTIVENESS OF A CONFERENCE.

It is almost impossible to realize that the great event of the P.N.E.U. year is over and that the Conference, which has been the subject of so much thought and work for the last two or three months, is now only a matter amongst most people for lingering and tolerant criticism. It is, however, about the practical work accomplished by the Union, of which the Conference is the crystallized demonstration, that I want to say a few words, though I should also like, if I can, to give you some idea of its more inward significance. The Annual Report will show you that the past year has not been a barren one, and I hope we are over bold or too optimistic when we say "we have lighted such a candle as by God's grace we trust shall never be put out." As it is so difficult for most of you to come into very close connection with the various developments of the Union it may interest those who could not attend the Conference to hear a few "generalisations" on the subject. We were fortunate

enough to have good audiences at all the meetings, and the papers often provoked animated discussions. This is a sure sign of life and enthusiasm, in fact I think, a spirit of trying to get to the root of the matter in hand was peculiarly present. The subjects of the papers had been made as wide and as far-reaching as possible, and when you read the verbatim reports in the July and August numbers of the *Parents' Review* you will be able to see for yourselves how each was handled. It is impossible, however, to make you feel, or to reproduce for you the sense of unity and co-operation which characterized the P.N.E.U. Conference. It has been well said that any society only exists in so far as it meets a want. The wants of the members of the P.N.E.U. are numerous, but I think many of those who attended went away with the feeling that many questions had been helpfully answered and many useful hints gained. This, however, must necessarily be nothing in comparison with the fact brought home again to each one of us, that it was really a splendid thing to a member of a society struggling, however feebly, towards erecting for itself a worthy temple in some large and generous scheme of education. I think it was Heine who said that we moderns could never build a cathedral, because we only held opinions, whereas the ancients had convictions. I think the P.N.E.U. has convictions, and that, therefore, we are slowly and surely building our cathedral.

Of the papers themselves I will say nothing, as you will be able to read them and enjoy them yourselves—all were inspiring and helpful, and some at least will have a practical outcome—and, at any rate, it is not now difficult to believe that the Union has before it a future which a few years ago seemed hardly possible. And this really tangible evidence of success makes us very humble when we think how wide are our prospects and how deep our convictions.

The material success of the Union is beyond question. Its moral success is, I believe, an equally happy and certain thing and exists not merely in consequence of material success, but, I was almost going to say, in spite of it. There is a saying that "nothing succeeds like success," but though I have no desire to invent a new paradox, yet, in a deep and spiritual sense, "nothing fails like success." Examples such as the later order of the Franciscans will occur to everyone. It is difficult for anybody, in any age, to avoid pitfalls; it is